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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a historical review of some current literary theories and practices which developed from contemporary philosophy. Structuralism, associated with Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss, with a seemingly scientific view of language and culture posited a systemic "center" that organized and sustained an entire structure. The historic attack against this central premise of structuralism is usually traced to a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," delivered by Jacques Derrida in 1966. Derrida criticized the Western "logocentric" notion of an ever-active transcendent center or ground. Poststructuralism is generally considered to include three main features: the primacy of theory; the decentering of the subject; and the fundamental importance of the reader. Following is a discussion on: (1) How has poststructuralism as a theory affected English classroom practices in the teaching of literature? and (2) How has poststructuralism affected the teaching of writing? Contains 15 references. (NKA)

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Poststructuralism as Theory and Practice in the English Classroom

by Harold K. Bush, Jr.

When Did Poststructuralism "Begin"?

In the late 1960s, just as structuralism was reaching its apex as an influential theory of language, along came a new wave of philosophers intent on subjecting it to a rigorous and sustained critique. Structuralism, an intellectual movement most readily associated with the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, examined cultural phenomena according to the underlying formal systems out of which those phenomena naturally spring. That is, both language and culture acquire meaning only insofar as they participate in a complex pool of structural relations.

This seemingly scientific view of language and culture posited a systemic "center" that organized and sustained an entire structure. The historical attack against this central premise of structuralism is usually traced to a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," delivered by Jacques Derrida to the International Colloquium at Johns Hopkins University in 1966. In his essay, later collected in his influential book *Writing and Difference* (1978), Derrida criticized the Western "logocentric" notion of an ever-active, transcendent center or ground. Since language does in fact lack such a center, say poststructuralist critics, language is therefore inherently unstable and fraught with ambiguity and "slippage," with the result that meaning is indeterminate.

What Is Poststructuralism?

Poststructuralism, like its related second cousin postmodernism, is a slippery term for anyone to define. As a result, any basic outline such as this summary is by necessity extremely general and open to controversy by theorists (a phenomenon, by the way, that is inherent to poststructuralist thought). Nevertheless, poststructuralism is generally considered to include three main features or tenets:

- **The Primacy of Theory**

In contemporary philosophy, it has become incumbent upon every critic to "theorize" every position and critical practice. In effect, "theory" has almost in and of itself become an independent field of study and research in the humanities, designating as it now does any account of whatever conditions determine all meaning and interpretation.

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In addition, much of contemporary theory seeks to challenge, destabilize, and subvert the foundational assumptions and beliefs which comprise all modes of discourse that make up western civilization. Because of this ongoing and at times rather stridently oppositional stance, poststructural criticism has been associated with an adversarial stance that often takes on the established institutional and political forces in American society. Among the many essays describing the rise and content of the field that today is called "theory," Terry Eagleton's fine study (1983) is the most accessible and the best introductory text.

- **The Decentering of the Subject**

Poststructural critics have called into question the very existence of the human "subject" or "self" posited by "humanism." The traditional view of individuals in society privileges the individual's coherent identity endowed with initiative, singular will, and purposefulness. However, this traditionalist concept is no longer seen as tenable in a poststructuralist view of human subjectivity. By way of contrast, the poststructural subject or self is seen to be incoherent, disunified, and in effect "decentered," so that depending upon the commentator a human being is described as, for example, a mere conveyor of unconscious mainstream ideologies, or as simply a "site" in which various cultural constructs and "discursive formations" created and sustained by the structures of power in a given social environment play themselves out. Some of the most important early essays signaling the turn to such a view of human subjectivity, and in particular of authorship, also appeared in the late 1960s, including influential works by theorists like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes.

- **The Fundamental Importance of the Reader**

With the destabilizing or decentering of the author and in more general terms of language as a system, the reader or interpreter has become the focal point of much poststructural theorizing. The traditional notion of a literary "work" that has some sort of objective, singular existence and meaning all its own has been rejected and translated into the more common contemporary category of "text," a concept that suggests the centrality of the reader and the decentered nature of the written product itself. According to "deconstruction," a theoretical approach to written texts that is largely an offshoot of poststructural theory, any text comprises a chain of signifiers which appears to evoke a singular meaning, but which upon investigation can be shown to contradict itself and thus "deconstruct" whatever meaning it can be said to contain. In the most extreme forms of deconstruction, meaning is fully

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indeterminate, and any claim to understand and interpret objectively and completely a given text is merely an illusory "effect."

In addition to deconstruction, another particularly important and related field of poststructuralist theory is "reader response theory." Reader response is most interested in how individuals read the same text in vastly different ways. Although reader response (like poststructuralism and deconstruction) should not be considered a field of unified critical thought, the term has "come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words 'reader,' 'the reading process,' and 'response' to mark out an area of investigation" (Tompkins, 1980). Thus, reader response theorists would agree that a work of literature cannot be understood apart from its effects on individual readers; indeed, the work's "meaning" really has no existence separate from the way readers respond to it. A recommended introductory text discussing reader response theory as a field of inquiry is a collection of foundational essays edited by Jane Tompkins entitled "Reader Response Criticism" (1980).

How Has Poststructuralism as a Theory Affected English Classroom Practices in the Teaching of Literature?

As Arthur Applebee has pointed out, the English curriculum's primary objective should be the enhancement and maintenance of the conversational feature of culture within the domain of the English classroom. Applebee and his colleagues advocate a view of curriculum that creates "a domain for culturally significant conversations into which we want our students to be able to enter" (Applebee, 1994). Applebee's aim, which demonstrates how poststructural theorizing has influenced English curriculum development, is to create such domains by holding to one of Applebee's key principles: "content that does not invoke further conversation is of no interest; it is dead as well as deadly." Blau (1993) provides a solid introductory essay linking current literary theory with actual teaching of literature. Johnson (1994) discusses how readers are profoundly affected by such social categories as race and gender; while Patterson (1992) considers reading as a discursive practice and demarcates the shift toward poststructural views of individualism.

How Has Poststructuralism Affected the Teaching of Writing?

Berlin (1992) and Winterowd and Blum (1994) have supplied two of the best introductions to how poststructural theory has had a massive impact on composition pedagogy. A growing number of scholars have written about this influence on a variety of practical areas: Hourigan (1991) describes the impact of poststructuralism on writing assessment, and Joyner (1991) advocates the employment of poststructural insights into the procedures of writing centers. Jonsberg (1993), and Hodgkins (1993) are interested in how poststructural theory might affect student-teacher relationships, writing assignments, and student writing modes such as expressivism.

Finally, poststructural theory is having an effect on areas of professionalization and teacher education. Capper and Jamison (1993), Deever (1993), Oldendorf (1992), and Robinson et al. (1993) have all contributed to the larger project of determining how the emergence of poststructuralism should affect what English teachers teach, how institutions should make evaluative judgments, and how preservice English teachers should be prepared to begin their careers.

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